

REPORT BY SHELTER REFORM ACTION COMMITTEE ON THE FEBRUARY 25, 2015 NEW YORK CITY HEALTH COMMITTEE HEARING.

"It's mind boggling to me that in 2015 there is there is not a full service shelter in every borough. My core belief is that we need full service, fully functioning and state of the art shelters in every borough." (Corey Johnson, Feb. 25, 2015)



Corey Johnson didn't mince words last week when chairing the Health Committee hearing on Queens council member Paul Vallone's bill requiring full service animal shelters in the



Bronx and Queens.

CM Paul Vallone

The good news is that 34 council members support Mr. Vallone's bill. Thirty-four sponsors are more than enough to get a bill passed.

But the bill hasn't come to a vote yet because the Council has to determine how money to set aside to build and run state-of-the-art shelters. What's certain is that the price tag will be a helluva higher than 15 years ago when the Department of Health was first ordered to build those shelters.

During the February 25th hearing, one council member after another expressed frustration with DOH representative Daniel Kass (who also serves as an AC&C board member). Kass (joined by his DOH sidekick, Mario Merlino, dodged and weaved to avoid answering whether the Bronx and Queens should have animal shelters.



DOH Ass't Commissioner Kass (L) and his side kick Mario Merlino

Chairman Johnson was the first to have a crack at Kass. "If we wanted the best system possible, the most optimal system possible..., do you think that would include 2 full service shelters in the Bronx and Queens?

"In all honesty I don't know," said Kass ... *dishonestly*.

"Really," said Johnson, "it's hard to believe!"

What if funding weren't an issue? Johnson asked, rephrasing the question to coax an answer out of Kass.

"The answer should be yes. But you didn't say that," observed an exasperated Johnson.

Former Health Committee Chairman Maria del Carmen Arroyo was equally unsuccessful at shaking an answer out of Kass. She noted that in his prepared testimony, Kass didn't even mention the shelters bill. "Why is that?" she asked. Kass responded:

"At the moment we'd like to kind of keep where we're at But for now we're really concentrated on the direction we're going in, the improvements that are being made."

Classic DOH. All's great at the AC&C. Stay the course. Don't talk about shelters. Trust us.

ANIMAL SHELTERS ARE A BASIC MUNICIPAL SERVICE, LIKE FIRE, SANITATION AND POLICE

Council members weren't buying what the DOH was peddling. The oft-repeated refrain at the hearing was that animal shelters are a basic municipal service like Fire, Sanitation, and Police.

Bronx and Queens residents pay taxes. So why aren't they receiving this basic service? Private groups echoed the sentiment. For example, ASPCA President Matt Bershadker

said: "It's both remarkable and unconscionable ... that we're having this conversation [about shelters] for 15 years." The DOH has always "shortchanged" the animal shelter system, expecting private groups to step in and pick up the slack.

"The need for full service shelters in the Bronx and Queens is [emphasis added]," Bershadker added

Obviously the DOH disagrees.

WHY DOES THE DOH OPPOSE SHELTERS FOR THE BRONX AND QUEENS?

The answer is simple: money. Funding for those shelters will have to come out of the DOH's budget. The DOH is perfectly happy spending money on people's health care. But on animals? Noooooooo! Noooooooo! Nooooooo!

THE DOH JUST ISN'T INTO ANIMALS

.
When it comes to capital improvements for the AC&C, the DOH has a terrible track record. For example, Kass testified how the DOH will build an adoptions center for Manhattan and install a new HVAC system for Brooklyn. Yet Chairman Johnson noted that in the DOH's preliminary budget, funding for those projects has been pushed to several years in the future. Why is that? Johnson asked. Kass didn't have an answer.

Or what about the DOH's promise back in 2011 for a new Queens "Receiving Center."

"How's that going?" asked Queens councilmember Vallone.

Kass and Merlino assured the Committee (as they've done several times before) that the DOH is committed to and actively pursuing a new site. They look and look but, gee, they can't find the right location. But they are committed to finding just the right spot. They really, really are

Wait a minute?

That's the same line the DOH fed the City Council ... *for 11 years* when it was supposed to be building shelters for the Bronx and Queens?

Why should believe the DOH says about its commitment to animal welfare?

Given the DOH's track record on capital improvements, it would be disastrous if the DOH controlled the design and placement of new animal shelters.

Esther Koslow of Shelter Reform Action Committee noted that the DOH's preference is to turn decrepit old factories located in unsavory neighborhoods into shelters. SRAC proposed a way to ensure that state-of-the-art shelters are built and in locations that are welcoming and convenient.

HOW TO GET A SHELTERS LAW PASSED

SRAC thanks all the council members at last week's hearing for their passionate efforts to ensure shelters for our 2 underserved boroughs. As Queens council member Vallone noted, advocating for those shelters "is not a radical movement." We also thank the office of Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr. for testimony in support of the shelters bill. Now, the job is to get a shelters law passed that has real teeth ... to take a bite out of the DOH's complacency, inaction and, yes, its budget.

WARNING: This report was prepared by and is the exclusive property of Shelter Reform Action Committee ©, not to be confused with any other group.